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Deep Feeling Fascination: Emotional Intelligence Twenty Years On

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We have over 4000 English words to describe our feelings, with 600 of those describing negative emotions. And yet many of us struggle to find the right words to express how we feel or ever fully understand our emotions. This is not surprising given our feelings can be complex, ambiguous, changing, contradictory, subjective and subconscious. Figuring out our own (and others') emotions becomes harder when we are under pressure, tired or unwell. In the same vein, it is not easy to control daily feelings of frustration, competitiveness, fear, arrogance and so on. For example, in the workplace, around 45% of managers report becoming angry with others too easily, 31% report mood swings and over 33% report constant irritability (CMI, 2012). These figures show an upward trend of negative emotions in the workplace over the last five years. Given this, it is understandable why emotional intelligence (EI) continues to be of interest to business and organisations since its emergence in the mid 1990s. Being able to know and manage our emotions, self motivate, as well as recognise others' emotions and handle relationships are essential 'soft skills' for today's workplace.

Emotional intelligence training has been enthusiastically embraced by UK companies for the last twenty years. This groundswell of interest revolves around EI's association with transformational leadership, resilience and being stress-fit. EI is also the hallmark of enterprising business behaviours and excellent customer service. In a supportive training environment, developing one's EI offers opportunities for better self understanding, successful management of emotions and thoughts, empathy and improved social relationships. However, despite EI's longevity in business, some new themes are surfacing which have implications for Human Resources (HR) best-practice training and development.

It is not surprising that corporate programmes focus on what EI can deliver to the business. Yet, EI training that adopts an integrative perspective which encourages participants to reflect on work and life, can reap personal and organisational gains. Crucially, with a focus on emotions, stress tolerance and values, EI training can raise awareness of work strains and work-life imbalance which can then be addressed through career development, appraisals, mentoring, coaching and feedback. As a by-product of this more holistic approach, insights into non-work relationships (becoming a better partner or parent) can improve participants' quality of life outside of work, with a positive spill-over to work.

By contrast, when EI training concentrates on the business imperative, participants can be motivated to use EI as a more strategic tool. Indeed, there is growing evidence that EI can be adopted for personal gains in self-promotion, impression management, calculative empathy and strategic relationship building (Kildruff et al, 2010). Particularly when employees are competing for money, status, promotions and other scant organizational resources this more single-minded, premeditated side of EI surfaces. For instance, employees may use praise and other tactics to ingratiate themselves to a supervisor or use empathy for instrumental gains. Whilst potentially benign, companies are wise to consider how the content of EI training, and their organisational culture could be fostering a more duplicitous use of EI at work.

Interestingly, the popular versions of EI (Goleman and Bar-On) can encourage managers to be more authentic and genuine at work e.g. re-connecting with one's feelings, character and identity; being more emotionally honest; practicing integrity. Many individuals attend EI workshops trying to be what they think a manager or leader should be but EI encourages individuals to be more comfortable in their own skin at work, removing the strain of pretence (Thory, 2015). Training with the popular EI models also provides opportunities to realise one's potential and make work more meaningful. For example, Bar-On (2010:59) explicitly includes the aptitudes 'self-actualization', 'happiness' and 'social responsibility' in his model and much of this focus encourages individuals to reflect on what is

significant and of value in their life and work - what engages their full commitment, flair, vigour and skill. When managers feel enthused to proactively shape their work to be more intrinsically meaningful and have scope to do so, they can experience increased engagement, satisfaction, productivity, motivation, happiness and less stress.

At the same time though, HR managers responsible for organizing and managing EI interventions must also be aware of some of the pitfalls. Research shows that participants can disclose private information (thoughts, feelings, experiences) during EI training to make sense of themselves or explore past feelings in relation to current thinking and behaviour (Thory, 2013; forthcoming). For individuals attending these EI courses, the nature of training can be intimate and intense and the impact profound. A clear benefit is that genuine emotional and intellectual growth can take place and sessions can be used for catharsis. Oftentimes though, issues of confidentiality and third party dissemination become pertinent. Mindful of career progression and reputation management, managers may feel concerned about whether their employer receives a report of their performance during the training. Hence, practitioners and participants should mutually agree upon the general types of disclosure and privacy boundaries adopted at the outset and agreements should be made on how disclosed information is treated during training. Relatedly, the experience can bring to the surface or 'unlock' uncomfortable emotions in participants, even when unsolicited. Therefore, practitioners should be trained to recognise when to refer participants to appropriate professional counsellors or EAP programmes and have basic skills themselves to manage such situations sensitively. This extends to the careful management of mental health issues which may surface through participant disclosures during EI workshops.

Because managers and leaders are conscious of how they 'perform' during EI training and how they apply EI to work situations, there are further issues relating to gender and culture for HR managers to consider. EI is often equated with natural 'feminine' abilities (identifying and understanding emotion in self and others, talking about emotion, empathy, and care). Assumedly then, women have a head start when they use EI in the workplace! Yet, when women use these skills in managerial and team working roles, their feminine qualities do not always lend them the kind of credit or remuneration men's strengths offer, or when men 'do' femininity. This is particularly the case in masculine work environments. Studies report that because these skills are seen as natural, feminine qualities, they are unacknowledged, seen as a "gift," ignored, and unrewarded in women (Thory, 2013).

By the same token, there is evidence that the emotionally literate male manager fares well in today's organisations. This was epitomised by Michelle Bachelet, Chile's President, who commented after an incident during which her predecessor President Ricardo Lagos was tearful during a speech, "The media said 'It's his sensitive side coming out,' but when I did it, they said: 'she's hysterical.' I'm not whining about it, but come on" (Butler, 2008; p. 20). There is evidence that a more managed emotional express or 'weak emotion' (teary eye) is assessed more positively in men than women. This is because emotion is perceived as a brief break in overall rational behaviour and provides a hint of humanity but not overall weakness. However, society holds stronger typical views of women's emotion compared to men. So it is possible that when men do 'femininity' they are seen as more socially competent because their emotion skills are seen as an ability. By contrast the 'emotional women' stereotype still pervades so that when women engage with emotions this is still framed within a stereotype of vulnerability, loss of power and control (Thory, 2013).

Criticisms have also been made because EI ignores cross-cultural differences. For instance, there are ethnicity issues underlying emotion management in working traditional Islamic women. In a culture where a woman is required to be modest and restrained, "what might be seen as 'modern' work is not designed around the emotional requirement and displays required of 'modest' women in Islamic societies" (Syed et al, 2005). Therefore, there can be a lack of parity in the way that EI is performed or appraised in the workplace especially when gender and culture are taken into consideration. Overall, these gender and cultural issues provoke new considerations for HR professionals offering EI workshops to employees. For instance, diversity training offers opportunities for attitudinal and behavioral change toward unfair advantages, sexism, gender and ethnicity stereotyping. Equally, HR

executives can encourage and support the development of emotional competence through reflective practice and experiential learning that is more representative of society.

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If any of these issues discussed here have affected or informed your view and use of EI training in your organisation or you would like to discuss them further please contact Kathryn at Kathryn.thory@strath.ac.uk